

Corporate Governance and Audit Committee

Note of Working Group

Wednesday 24th June 2020

Applications Portfolio Programme – Update on Access project

The Head of Information Management and Governance presented the report of Director of Resources and Housing to update the Committee in relation to the Access Project.

The Committee were advised that at the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic the project sustained a three week delay as a result of:

- issues in relation to staffing which were resolved by the prompt diversion of internal resource; and
- issues relating to technical access to databases by teams in the Highways Service which were resolved by the relocation of relevant hardware and staff groups to Apex.

The Committee were informed that recruitment to the project team has now concluded with the addition of a second developer, and the movement into the team of an officer to manage communications and engagement with services. The Committee received assurance that the project is now fully staffed and resourced and is working at capacity, with confidence that the 2003 upgrade will be completed within 3 weeks of the target date. The Committee were advised that the Cabinet Office is sympathetic to the issues arising from the pandemic, and comfortable with progress on Access 2003.

The progress figures for upgrade of outstanding Access 2003 databases set out at Annex 2 of the report were updated. As of 24th June there are:

- No new databases
- 39 in progress (9 of which have already been through initial testing)
- 0 awaiting business response
- 124 in testing
- 16 awaiting go live (which can happen as soon as the Access 2010 icon has been deployed to the relevant desktops.)

The Committee was advised that planning work in relation to the Access 2010 project has slipped slightly as a result of the focus on Access 2003 but that the Cabinet Office are supportive of both methodology and proposed timescales. The Head of Information Management and Governance undertook to circulate written confirmation of this when received from the Cabinet Office.

Members of the Committee asked questions and received responses as follows:

Q: When will the Access 2010 icon be deployed?

A: The icon will be deployed as the business is ready, supporting a smooth transition to the Access 2010 database. This can happen multiple times daily.

Q: Is the strategy to convert databases on an old specification version of Access to a newer specification?

A: Work currently being undertaken is to convert existing databases to Access 2010 which is compliant. When this work is complete, work will be undertaken to replace those databases with alternative solutions.

Q: With reference to paragraph 3.6 of the report, are other authorities in, or have they been in, a similar situation and is there anything the Council can learn from this?

A: Other authorities have, or have had, similar situations. Historically LCC required that services using Access databases maintained them and ensured that they were updated as necessary. More recently, centralisation of the IT function has enabled scanning and checking across the Council and revealed that databases had not been managed appropriately. Since this time work has been ongoing to ensure that the service has a full picture of databases in use, and has put the Access project in place to tackle non-compliance.

Q: in relation to paragraph 4.4 of the report, is there a breakdown of figures as to databases which can be replaced by existing solutions and those which will need new solutions to be commissioned?

A: Those figures can be obtained, and will be circulated to Members.

Q: What steps have been taken to future proof against similar issues occurring?

A: Work has taken place across the Digital and Information Service to create technical roadmaps for all solutions. These will identify when solutions are due for upgrade or in need of replacement. This will enable the Council to make full utilisation of the technical capacity of these solutions whilst also ensuring data security.

Q: Will future solutions be Microsoft?

A: We are a 'Microsoft House', and are planning to upgrade to Microsoft Office 365.

Q: The NHS have been billed as having a good deal with Microsoft – does the Council have similar terms?

A: 'N365' the NHS deal extends to social care. The Chief Information Officer is working together with other CIOs nationally to see whether the NHS deal can be extended to use across all local authority functions.

Q: When databases have been upgraded to Access 2010 what will prevent those databases from becoming out of date and non-compliant?

A: planning is underway for the Access 2010 replacement project with the ultimate aim to eradicate the use of Access completely, although if time critical, and alternative solutions have not been identified in relation to identified databases these may be converted to Access 2016.

Q: What potential alternatives have been identified?

A There are four main alternative –

- Power BI will provide the analytics required for more than half of the identified Access 2010 databases;
- Sharepoint solutions;
- Appropriate use of purpose designed business applications for personal data (for example the MOSAIC children's system); and
- Deletion of databases where the information is already stored within an alternative system or platform.

Q: Is there potential through interface with GIS?

A: GIS is an excellent tool for analytics, and work will be undertaken to identify whether it will be useful.

Q: the updated figures show fewer databases than those provided in the report. Is there an explanation?

A: Some databases have been deleted, and no longer need upgrade; others have gone live and are no longer captured in the figures which only relate to databases which need work.

Q: How certain can the committee be that the Access 2003 work will be completed within the three week slippage period identified?

A: The project is confident that the remaining work can be completed. Confirmation will be circulated on 21st July that the Access 2003 work is concluded. If weekly analysis of progress identifies any issues the Committee will be alerted.

Q: What are the consequences internal or external if the project does not complete in this timeframe?

A: The Cabinet Officer are understanding of the impact of the pandemic and committed to working with authorities. Whilst no new PSN certificate will be issued until the work is completed the Cabinet Office have indicated that the current PSN certificate will not expire. If review of progress indicates any risk that the project will not complete by 21st July further contact will be made with the Cabinet Office to explain and agree appropriate actions. Although the authority will remain PSN compliant it should be noted that there are ongoing risks in relation to network security and that vulnerabilities exist allowing external or internal actors to access and misuse/misappropriate data through remaining Access 2003 runtime.

The Chair of Committee undertook to escalate the issue appropriately should there be any indication that the Access 2003 project would not reach satisfactory conclusion by 21st July 2020.